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THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE STUDENT--A STUDY IN IDENTITY CRISIS.

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THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE STUDENT RE-EXPERIENCES THE TYPICAL ADOLESCENCE IDENTITY CRISIS RELATED TO AND REINFORCED BY AMBIVALENCE, DISTORTED EXPECTATIONS, AND THE LACK OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT. THE CAUSAL FACTORS, INHERENT IN THE NATURE OF THE RESIDENTIAL UNIVERSITY, ARE--(1) DETACHMENT FROM DIRECT PARENTAL SUPPORT, (2) THE STRUGGLE TO BREAK FROM PARENTAL CONTROL AND CHOICE, AND (3) THE NEED FOR NEW ADJUSTMENTS CAUSED BY UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS IN THE FAMILY LIVING SITUATION. IF THESE PROBLEMS ARE UNRESOLVED, DIFFICULTIES CAN ARISE IN ACADEMIC FUNCTIONING AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT. THE STUDENT PROJECTS HIS IDENTITY STRUGGLE ONTO THE UNIVERSITY SETTING. THOSE WHO SEEK HELP USUALLY RECEIVE INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING OR THERAPY. IT IS FELT, HOWEVER, THAT IN VIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL AND PATHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM, GROUP OR FAMILY APPROACHES IN TREATMENT MAY BE MORE BENEFICIAL. THIS SPEECH WAS PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN ORTHOPSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION CONVENTION (44TH), WASHINGTON, D.C., MARCH 1967. (SK)

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The Residential College Student: A Study in Identity Crisis

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The purpose of this paper is to describe how college students in a large residential university* experience an exacerbation of the typical adolescent identity crisis which is related to and reenforced by several factors indigenous to the residential nature of the university.

The basic thesis presented evolves around the social-psychological meaning of the students separation from his parental home and his subsequent induction into a living mileau which is quite different both positively and negatively from the parental home. Three fundamental and interrelated factors are discussed: (a) the significance of detachment from direct parental support; (b) the ambiguous struggle for final emancipation from parental control and choice; and (c) the problems created for new adjustments by the presence of old, unresolved conflicts previously generated in family living.

The maintenance of identity or the identity theme has been termed by Bowlby as "the essence of the human condition", and has been frequently described in the literature as the characteristic form of psychopathology in contemporary society as a whole (5,8,14,15), as well as the college population in particular (10,13,16). Identity has been most often correlated with the establishment of object relations and the awareness of separation

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* Purdue University is a land grant, state university with 21,000 resident students representing a cross-section of the country in part, but with many students from native Indiana and the midwest. While offering a wide spectrum of study courses, considerable emphasis and facilities are invested in the engineering and physical sciences with an only recently increasing interest in the humanities and social scien

from objects (3,4,7). It has been described as a directional personality structure whereby the individual orients himself to others with the primary identifications serving as the basis of a permanent identity structure (8). Erikson (6) has expanded the conception to also include interrelated social and psychological phenomena and considers identity to be "the capacity of the ego to sustain sameness and continuity in the face of changing fate." In an earlier paper (1), I postulated an organizing concept in interpersonal relations termed "Identity Maintenance Operations." This was defined as "the reaction to and manipulation of interpersonal relations in order to maintain significant self-awareness." Erikson further aptly describes the adolescent identity dilemma in that he "must let go of his safe hold on childhood depending for a breathless interval on a relatedness between the past and the future" (6). What emerges from the adolescent's childhood must make sense in a larger social reality of work and love. Values meaningful to him must make some universal significance. Herein lies the dilemma for the residential college student who is separated from a previously learned and adjusted to value system, thrust into a mileau of new values pertaining to striving independence, intellectual searching, and evaluation, and exposure to a world of adult-like expectations and pressures. I say "adult-like" because I feel little of what the residential college student engages in truly encompasses the kind and degree of responsibility and privilege of an independent adult. The degree to which he is able to weather the late adolescent transition to adulthood while in college is decided by his own prior familial experience and relationships, and his current experiences and relationships, familial, peer, and academic. Structurally, this is the

capacity of his ego to synthesize and integrate toward a new level of functioning. This process is seen as both a normal psychosocial growth process as well as a fertile field for the manifestation of psychopathology.

In the residential university the student is more or less detached from parental support in an immediate sense. For some this loss of stable values and direction results in anxieties which lead to the weekend supportive visit (which may also be brought about by the projected parental anxiety, communicated either subtly or directly to the student). With others, an overcompensation in the form of pseudoindependence and pseudoadultness manifest itself. The student, still in late adolescence, generally considers himself an adult on the basis of superficial behavior and the opportunity to exercise a new degree of free choice and behavior. He still, however, lacks the experience and the breadth of knowledge of responsible adulthood. The students own code of behavioral expectations tends to perpetuate the "instant adult myth" and rejects the actual late adolescent psychosocial status.

Since support, encouragement, and direction are essential ingredients for human growth and development, the students partial and at time wholesale denial of its relevance (or the opposite, a neurotic over reliance) only makes a stable identity realization more difficult. The denial of a necessary ingredient in growth only necessitates seeking for it elsewhere. If the need for parental support largely denied residential student is not found in surrogate support in the university's services and faculty, the demands of academic productivity clearly emerge as a stressful

experience.* The adolescent student's many self concerns during this transitional leap into adulthood are frequently projected onto the academic arena. This can be seen in the extreme by either "I can't do it" (assuming the dependent child role)or "What's a little depression or GI distress, I'll get there in spite of the suffering" (counterphobic pseudoindependence). I speak here of the student with more visible identity problems.

It appears to me, that in the absence of parental targets for unresolved resentment or parental succorance for support of dependency, the student projects the parental image onto "the institution", "the faculty", etc. They become the target of his struggle for final emancipation from his own parents who are physically absent. The demands, the hostilities, the early attempts at interpersonal intimacy here enacted, stem from two basic developmental crises: (a) his disillusionment in the myth of parental and adult omniscience, and the accompanying feelings of helplessness with the invalidation of this myth. While at the same time, needing support to face up to the ambiguities and uncertainties of adulthood; (b) his dissatisfaction with his own parents for not "making" him a perfect individual, usually accompanied by retaliation fantasies if this be openly expressed and thereby cutting off the last vestiges of parental support.

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* c. f. Shoben's (12) report on the 1965 National Conference on Student Stress wherein the crucial issue was seen as residing in the nature of the educational experience per se (p. 15) rather in the psychosocial nature of the late adolescence - adulthood dilemma. Even though earlier in this report (p. 14) specific reference was made to the difficulties experienced in intimacy formation by and among the students themselves which is projected to student-faculty relations. There will always be a basic psychological gap between students and faculty, firstly because adolescent students and adult faculty do not largely share the same interests and life expectancies; and secondly because student life is much different than professor life. Students seldom seem to realize that the professor is a person with a life of responsibilities, obligations, and sources of gratification within his family or circle of friends apart from the university life which is largely the environment of the residential student. The Shoben report appears to me to put the cart before the horse in mistaking the external-educational stress as primary without apparently recognizing the internal-developmental dilemma of the prolonged adolescence of the college student.

A similar threat and guilt is felt with the transfer of the primary love object from the parent(s) to peer of the opposite sex - or in situations where the identification has been negative - hostility acted out or directed inward in self rejection. Here the residential university presents the maximum opportunity for the positive development of this process but at the same time less opportunity for parental support in the trials and tribulations of intimacy formation. This lack of support problem, of course, applies in situations where the early parent-child relationship has been basically positive, and communication, in spite of the parent-adolescent alienation, adequate for the eventual formation of an adult-to-adult relationship between the student and his parents.

The student who carries with him into the college setting prior conflicts with his family has less opportunity to resolve these conflicts directly in the parents absence.* Ego energies sapped by this psychopathology creates difficulties in meeting new and additional demands for academic functioning and social adjustment. These students have not only this to contend with but the stress all students experience at the residential university described earlier. The residential college experience can therefore become a significant threshold variable in the precipitation of overt symptomatology. The parents absence appears to expedite the development of compulsive - repetitious transferential acting out with others (both peer and adult) in the campus setting.

Basically the residential student, with the relative absence of parents is engaged in a more internalized struggle whose intensity leads to a

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* We now know much more about the nature and perpetuation of emotional disturbance as learned within a "family system" and how the familial experience provides the contextual validation for patterns of adjustment to reality demands especially in interpersonal relationships (2). And furthermore how the evaluation and control of relationship distortion can be more meaningfully achieved within the original familial context (11).

projection onto the university; whereas, the commutor students identity crisis is a more overt, externalized struggle with parents present in their wished for or actual attempts to control the student.*

For students who seek therapy for their problems whether of residual neurotic nature or stress induced typical late adolescent struggles or both, several approaches are available. Traditionally, individual counseling or therapy has been available with group therapy and more recently conjoint family approaches in addition. Individual therapy gives the student a guiding model with interest and concern for identification and support and functions as a parent surrogate experience. Group therapy strengthens the peer group identity, gives multiple reenforcement in support of self esteem attainment, and permits maximum self-viewing, within a highly supportive context. Both individual and group approaches emphasize self actualization and identity realization leading to significant self awareness.

Family approaches only recently utilized (when practical) allow other dimensions and potentials for identity growth. When the total family unit (parents plus siblings) or just parents and student are present, one has substantially more realistic leverage in working through the students ambivalence and the parents stereotyped and long standing control devices. A friendly separation in the service of emotional growth is often possible, with more adequate communication lessening the relationship distortions which the student has transferred to contemporary relationships as well as continuing to expect from the parents. The family unit approach is invaluable in specific crises and always as a diagnostic device even if prolonged parental involvement is not possible. The same leverage is present when working with

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* c. f. Grygier's (9) paper on the commutor students problem at the University of Toronto.

student married couples as a couple unit or in combining the advantages of both group and family approaches in groups of married couples. One can see very clearly in young student marriages the attempt of both partners to manipulate the other in the attainment of their own identity realization and toward greater and more significant self awareness frequently in perpetuating an earlier familial pattern.

SUMMARY

The prolonged adolescance of the college student, with its ambivalence, distorted expectations, and lack of intimate emotional support, increases anxiety in the search for significant self awareness (identity). These factors are exacerbated in the residential university, which abstracts the student from the learned familial context and replaces it with a world of different expectations accompanied by a further lack of intimate support. The university setting frequently becomes the object of displacement for the student's identity struggle. Developmental and pathologic aspects were discussed, with brief descriptions of the values of various therapeutic approaches.

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